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Vietnam: Using the MIA Issue as a Bargaining Chip

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Summary

In dealing with Washington on the issue of US servicemen missing in action in Vietnam, Hanoi has had one overriding goal--to gain concessions from the United States. During the first few years after the war, Hanoi concentrated on conditions included in the Paris accords of 1973: provision of US economic aid for post-war reconstruction, and US respect for Vietnamese sovereignty and territorial integrity. Although the Vietnamese approach has fluctuated from abrasive to conciliatory in response to US moves, the demands have remained largely the same. With the invasion of Kampuchea in 1978, however, Hanoi expanded its demand for recognition of Vietnamese sovereignty to include recognition of the Vietnamese-supported Heng Samrin regime in Phnom Penh.

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As long as Hanoi and Washington remain at odds over the Kampuchea issue, we expect no major shift in Vietnamese policy toward MIAs. Concessions by the United States on lesser issues--aid to Laos or adjustments to the Orderly Departure Program, for example--would, however, probably encourage Hanoi to release some additional information or remains.

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The Early Policy: Trading Remains for Aid and Recognition

When Saigon fell to the Communists on 30 April 1975, approximately 2,500 US personnel throughout Indochina--including 42 civilians--were listed by the Department of Defense as unacknowledged prisoners of war, missing in action (MIA), or

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killed in action with bodies not recovered. And although the Paris Agreements called for exchange of information concerning missing personnel, Hanoi has stalled on providing names of missing Americans or repatriating American remains. By mid-1984, the Vietnamese had returned less than 100 remains, and only four remains had been repatriated by Laos. [redacted]

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Following their victory, Vietnamese leaders appeared confident in their ability to use the MIA issue to ensure that concessions contained in the 1973 Paris accords were met: first and foremost, US economic aid, and second, US support for (or at least noninterference with) Hanoi's attempts to establish itself as the legitimate government of Vietnam. When Vietnam first applied for admission to the United Nations in 1975, for example, a Vietnamese diplomat told the US Embassy in Paris that his government had agreed to release the remains of three US pilots. After the United States cast its veto, the diplomat informed the Embassy that permission had been withdrawn. The second veto in September 1976 brought an official letter from the Vietnamese UN observers, blaming American "hostility" for the stalemate between the two countries. [redacted]

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Hanoi's leaders initially adopted a manipulative and abrasive tone. They accused the United States of failure to comply with the Paris Agreements while claiming Vietnam had "scrupulously" done so. Vietnamese spokesmen responded to US countercharges by claiming that Washington's lack of goodwill obstructed progress on the MIA issue. [redacted]

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Hanoi Tries a New Tack ...

These tactics were clearly unsuccessful, and in the fall of 1976 the US announcement that it would again veto Vietnam's UN bid because of the MIA issue prompted Hanoi to try a softer approach. After the Security Council postponed consideration of Vietnam's application until November, Vietnam agreed to hold talks with the United States in Paris. [redacted]

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[redacted] Vice Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach stated that his government was making a concerted effort to obtain more information on missing personnel. Thach said he expected US aid eventually, but would set no preconditions for the talks. [redacted]

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Beginning in December 1976, several developments may have encouraged Vietnam to believe this softer stand would pay off with the new administration:

- The House Select Committee on Americans Missing in Southeast Asia concluded in December 1976 that no live US prisoners were being held in Indochina.
- UN Ambassador-Designate Andrew Young stated in January that talks might soon be reopened with Vietnam, and that

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he hoped that the United States would normalize ties with the Vietnamese shortly.

-- President Carter quickly carried through on his campaign promise to send a presidential commission to Hanoi to discuss MIAs with the Vietnamese and Lao. [redacted]

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...But Demands Remain the Same

But the Vietnamese treatment of the Woodcock Commission in March 1977 indicated that Hanoi's basic stand remained firm. Although Vice Foreign Minister Phan Hien noted that any information Hanoi might obtain on missing personnel would be given to the United States "as soon as possible," he continued to stress the Paris accords and US aid "obligations." The Lao authorities followed Hanoi's lead, linking MIA information with aid. [redacted]

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After the United States announced in May 1977 that it would not provide reconstruction aid but neither would it veto Vietnam's application to the United Nations--if MIA investigations were expedited--Hanoi reinforced its aid demands.

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The Vietnamese team subsequently announced the names of 20 more MIAs whose remains were to be released, but waited until Vietnam was admitted to the United Nations in September 1977 before allowing repatriation of the remains. [redacted]

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Kampuchea Brings Stalling--and Stiffening Attitude

With the deterioration in Vietnam's relations with China and with the Chinese-supported regime in Kampuchea, Hanoi in mid-1978 again appeared willing to back off from its demand for US aid, and it began to lobby Washington for normal relations.

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The former chairman of the House Select Committee on MIAs was invited to Hanoi and Vientiane, where the Lao promised to return four remains; "unofficial" talks with the State Department were held; and a small group of Vietnamese with US passports were permitted to emigrate. [redacted]

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By late fall, however, preoccupation with China and with the Khmer Rouge regime in Phnom Penh--plus lack of concrete progress in improving relations with the United States--caused Hanoi to turn decisively toward the Soviet Union. With the signing of the Soviet-Vietnamese Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in

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November 1978, Vietnam committed itself--and its weaker neighbor Laos--to a course directly opposed to that of the Carter administration, which was about to normalize relations with China. [redacted]

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The US reaction to the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea brought a turning point for Hanoi's policies on missing personnel. Although the Vietnamese virtually discarded their demands for aid, they adopted new, hard-line tactics aimed at undermining US resolve to oppose the occupation of Kampuchea. They used MIA meetings to denounce US policy and they bypassed official channels in favor of "sympathetic" Americans. During the second of two technical meetings in 1981, the Vietnamese released the names of three missing personnel and promised that their remains would be delivered later. But Vu Hoang--head of the Office for Seeking Missing Personnel--used this opportunity to castigate the United States for backing Chinese aggression, unfairly holding Vietnam totally responsible for resolving the MIA issue, and violating the Paris accords. [redacted]

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On the eve of a US mission visit to Hanoi in 1982, Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach publicly announced that further use of the MIA issue by the United States for political purposes would end Vietnamese cooperation. The Vietnamese then refused to set a schedule for technical meetings and reacted to a subsequent US veto on aid for Vietnam by providing new information on four MIA cases to the Vietnam Veterans of America. [redacted]

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The Indochina Foreign Ministers' communique in late January 1984 attempted to increase pressure on the United States. The three countries agreed to cooperate with each other on the MIA question, but they stated that cooperation with the United States would be conditional upon the renunciation of its "hostile" policy. This unprecedented statement appeared to be a bald attempt by Vietnam to use MIAs to persuade the United States to grant de facto recognition of the Phnom Penh regime backed by Hanoi. Shortly after the communique's release, Phnom Penh indeed offered information concerning the whereabouts of US personnel missing in Kampuchea between 1975 and 1979 to US officials, but dropped the offer when the US refused to deal directly with the Kampuchean. The Vietnamese thus far have refused to act as a conduit for any information from Kampuchea. [redacted]

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Testing the Waters With Laos?

The Lao similarly have adopted a "carrot and stick" policy. After the United States made a donation to a Lao hospital in late 1981, the Lao agreed to invite the National League of Families to visit the following year. According to the US Embassy, Lao rhetoric during the visit echoed that of Vietnam some years previously--emphasizing US "responsibility" for war damage, and Vientiane's desire for aid and improved relations. [redacted]

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For this reason--and because Laos has faithfully followed Vietnam's foreign policy initiatives--we believe Hanoi encouraged Laos to begin MIA negotiations with the United States. Hanoi's leaders may have been seeking to open a second forum (under Vietnamese guidance) to increase Hanoi's leverage or to test US willingness to provide aid or make concessions to a close ally.

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Hanoi's Policy for the Future

We expect Hanoi and Vientiane to continue to manipulate the MIA issue in an attempt to gain concessions from the United States. Basically, Hanoi seeks changes in US policy that would lead to recognition of the Heng Samrin regime in Kampuchea and provision of aid to Vietnam. We doubt, however, that the Vietnamese leadership expects to achieve such goals, and we think Hanoi may be willing to trade information or remains for lesser concessions--less vocal US support for ASEAN's Kampuchea policy, for example, or a US agreement to support an "empty-seat" formula for Kampuchea at the UN. Hanoi also has been seeking a separate emigration quota for Amerasian children under the Orderly Departure Program in order to speed up the departure of children fathered by US servicemen during the war. Finally, Hanoi might be more forthcoming in response to a long-term aid agreement between the United States and Laos that would indirectly benefit the Vietnamese by easing their aid commitments to Vientiane. Such an agreement, however, might also lead to increased pressure for aid to Vietnam.

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Appendix

Chronology of MIA-Related Events

1955
February Viet Minh sign agreement with French on searching for, disintering, repatriating remains of missing combatants from both sides. Viet Minh to provide information on graves in the South, and if French cannot find the sites, the Viet Minh will locate the sites for them.

1969
May First official US public statement of dissatisfaction with North Vietnamese treatment of the POW/MIA issue.

1973
January United States and North Vietnam sign the Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring the Peace in Vietnam (Paris Accords). Hanoi provides list of all POWs in North Vietnam and repatriates them within the stipulated 60 days.

February Talks begin on US economic aid to North Vietnam.

September Hanoi delegation to Four Part Joint Military Team announces it will not search for MIAs while South Vietnam continues to hold political prisoners.

1975
April Hanoi releases names of three MIAs killed in North Vietnam to Senator Edward Kennedy.

June Pham Van Dong offers to normalize relations with United States, demanding that US honor "obligations" of reconstruction aid.

August North Vietnamese diplomat tells US Embassy in Paris Hanoi will turn over three sets of remains, but offer is withdrawn after US vetoes Vietnam's UN application.

September House Select Committee on MIAs formed.

December Vietnamese Ambassador meets with Select Committee in Paris, links aid to MIAs, and offers to turn over three sets of remains.

1976
March-August United States and Vietnam exchange notes on normalization talks; United States stresses MIA accounting as precondition, Vietnam stresses aid "obligations."

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July Hanoi labels President Ford's speech to the National League of Families "slanderous," and accuses Ford of electioneering.

September Hanoi announces second try for UN seat, and turns over list of 12 MIAs killed in North Vietnam; the first such release since April 1975. Hanoi again charges President Ford is using MIAs for electioneering.

November US-Vietnam delegations negotiate in Paris.

December US Select Committee reports belief that no US personnel are being held alive in Indochina, recommends that United States begin direct discussions in order to gain fullest possible accounting.

1977

March Woodcock Commission travels to Hanoi and Vientiane; Vietnam says it will cooperate with United States on MIAs but continues to stall; MIA procedures set up.

May United States announces it will not veto next Vietnamese application to UN if Hanoi will speed up MIA investigations, but United States will not grant aid. US-Vietnamese talks resume; Congressional Resolution prohibits all nonemergency aid to Indochina.

June Vietnam announces names of 20 MIAs.

September Vietnam gains UN seat; remains of 20 MIAs repatriated.

1978

July VNOSMP and JCRC personnel meet in Hawaii.

August Congressional team visits Vietnam and Laos; four remains promised from Laos, 14 from Vietnam.

December Vietnam invades Kampuchea

1979

August Congressional delegation finds Hanoi willing to talk but not to compromise.

1980

October JCRC officials hold talks in Hanoi.

1981

February JCRC-VNOSMP meeting in Hanoi.

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June JCRC-VNOSMP meeting; three MIA names released.

December Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) visit Hanoi.

1982

February Joint US-League of Families delegation to Hanoi.

May Vietnam releases four MIA names to VVA.

September JCRC-League of Families group visits Hanoi and Vientiane; Laos allows them to visit crash sites; Thach subsequently announces acceptance of quarterly technical meetings.

December Technical experts meet in Hanoi; inspect crash site.

1983

February JCRC delegations visits both Hanoi and Vientiane; Hanoi provides information on 12 names.

1984

January Indochina Foreign Ministers' communique takes hard line on MIAs.

February US mission visits Hanoi.

April Hanoi postpones JCRC-VNOSMP technical meeting.

May First team of Australian officials allowed into Vietnam to look for Australian MIAs.

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